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AUTHOR Gosch, Steve
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ABSTRACT

A useful way of organizing global history survey courses for undergraduate students is to emphasize the theme of long-distance trade across cultural or civilizational frontiers. Three analytic models accentuate the importance of long-distance trade: (1) the typology of exchange by Karl Polanyi; (2) the concept of the trade diaspora as defined by Philip Curtin; and (3) the world system approach employed by Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, and other scholars. The purpose of utilizing these models is to help students move from world history as facts and factoids to world history as patterns and processes. The results of emphasizing cross-cultural trade to organize world history survey courses remains in doubt as student papers and examinations showed mixed results. (CK)

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Session #78: Matters of Content: Innovative Paradigms for Teaching the World History Survey Course

Title of Paper: Cross-Cultural Trade as a Framework for Teaching World History: Concepts and Applications

Author: Steve Gosch

Affiliation: University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

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The most important lesson that my world history students have taught me during the past ten years is that if my course is to work, it must be conceptually clear. "There is so much information to learn in this course," they tell me. And, as everyone is this room knows all too well, they are right. There is, inevitably, a lot of data for students to absorb in a course in global history. In addition, I know that despite my best efforts at coherence, my course does at times seem to be little more than the story of "one damn thing after another." How to avoid suffocating my students in an avalanche of facts? To me, this is the great challenge presented by the world history course.

The topical approach to world history introduced by Kevin Reilly (2nd ed. 1989) in his classic textbook, The West and the World, is one way of meeting this challenge. Some of my most rewarding teaching experiences have come during the semesters when I based my course on Kevin's book. This afternoon Jean Johnson, Carleton Tucker, and Sarah Hughes--in showing us how a focus on recurring patterns in world history, religion, and gender can be used to structure and enrich the survey course--have provided us with other valuable options.

My paper offers still another alternative for structuring the world history survey. It contends that an emphasis on the theme of long-distance trade across cultural or civilizational frontiers can be a useful way of organizing survey courses in global history. Although the paper will

focus on the premodern period, the suggestions are applicable to the centuries since 1500 as well.

* * *

Recent scholarship on hunter-gatherers, Neolithic agriculturalists, and the first urban civilizations highlights the importance of long-distance trade in the distant past. Lynda Shaffer's (1992) superb book on Native Americans Before 1492 shows how indigenous peoples in the regions of the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley developed far-reaching trade circuits long before they engaged in agriculture. James Mellaart's (1975) work at Catal Huyuk illustrates how one Neolithic community flourished, in part, because of its central role in the long-distance trade of obsidian. And much of the recent work on the birth of urban civilization in Mesopotamia emphasizes the importance of long-distance trade rather than irrigated agriculture as the source of the surplus that made early city life possible (Frank, 1993).

In my course I use three analytical models as ways of emphasizing the importance of long-distance trade: Karl Polanyi's typology of exchange in general, the concept of the trade diaspora as defined by Philip Curtin, and the world system approach employed by Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein, Jane Schneider, Janet Abu-Lughod and numerous other scholars.

Polanyi's framework of reciprocity, redistribution, and market exchange is excellent for introducing basic issues

(Polanyi et al., 1957; Dalton, 1968; Sabloff and Lamberg-Karlovsky, 1975). According to Polanyi humankind engages in three main types of exchange. In egalitarian, stateless societies, the reciprocal exchange of social objects predominates. To the extent that long-distance trade takes place in societies of this kind, it is gift exchange. With the development of an economic surplus and the formation of structures of social and political power, reciprocity gives way to the collection and subsequent redistribution of social objects by elite groups. Long-distance exchange in such societies is nonmarket or "administered" trade and is conducted in neutral "ports of trade." Finally, in modern capitalist societies market-based exchange becomes the rule and trade is conducted in accordance with the laws of supply and demand.

Polanyi's framework has led to much scholarly debate. (Curtin, 1984: 87-89). Specialists on the ancient Near East have been especially critical of Polanyi with regard to his treatment of exchange in Mesopotamia. Polanyi argued that all trade in the ancient Near East was under strict authoritarian controls; market exchange and free-lance merchants simply did not exist. However, a generation of research has established that he was wrong on this point Curtin, 1984: 70). The existence of market-based exchange in ancient Mesopotamia is indicated by evidence that the price of textiles, copper, tin, gold, silver and precious stones fluctuated over time (Adams, 1974).

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Although the Polanyi model must be modified to take account of more recent empirical research, I think the catagories are still useful. Xinru Liu (1988) employs them as a way of sorting out the types of trade between China and India from the first century to the sixth. She sees reciprocal gift exchanges between the Chinese authorities and the nomads of central Asia as the type of transaction which inaugerated Sino-Indian trade on the Silk Road. Liu also regards the oases in the Taklamakan Desert and the special quarters for foreign merchants in the Chinese cities of Chang-an and Luoyang, where foreign trade was carefully supervised, as the functional equivalents of Polanyi's ports of trade. In addition, according to Liu, the existence of rich merchants in Chinese and Indian cities indicates that there was free-lance trade and that prices were somewhat shaped by the forces of supply and demand.

Paul Wheatley (1975) also makes use of the Polanyi frame in his examination of the impact of Indian merchants on Southeast Asian societies during the early first millennium. Wheatley argues that prior to the arrival of the Indian traders, most Southeast Asian polities were chiefdoms within which reciprocity was the predominant mode of exchange. The long-term effect of the arrival of the Indian entrepreneurs was to induce a series of sweeping changes into Southeast Asian life. Among the most important of these changes were the simultaneous transformation of the chiefdoms into Indian-style kingdoms and the shift from exchange based on

reciprocity to that based on redistribution. Wheatley's study is a vivid illustration of the connections between long-distance trade, modes of exchange, and political structures.

The Indian merchant-mariners arrived in the Malay Strait each year when the monsoon winds blowing across the Bay of Bengal were favorable. It is likely that after a stay of as long as a year, some of the Indian traders returned to their "home offices" on the Coromandel coast while others remained in the Southeast Asian emporia. The result was the establishment of an Indian trade diaspora composed of three groups of merchants: permanent residents of south Indian coastal cities, semi-permanent denizens of the Southeast Asian ports, and a third group of traders that regularly moved back and forth.

Trade diasporas are the subject of Philip Curtin's (1984) valuable book, Cross-Cultural Trade in World History. Curtin defines trade diasporas as "communities of merchants living among aliens in associated networks" (Curtin, 1984: 3). His study is an examination of the importance of these networks in various parts of the world from 2000 BCE to the nineteenth century. I use Curtin's volume as a second way of incorporating long-distance trade into my course.

According to Curtin, the earliest documentary records establishing the existence of a trade diaspora are the clay tablets which illuminate the activities of Assyrian merchants who traded on the Anatolian Peninsula around 2000 BCE. Assyrian merchants from the city-state of Ashur travelled to

Anatolian cities like Kanesh (present-day Kultepe) in order to exchange Iranian tin and Babylonian textiles for locally-extracted gold, silver, and copper.

Like Wheatley's Indian merchants who later traded in Southeast Asian ports, the Assyrian traders in Anatolia were divided into "stayers" and "movers." The stayers became semi-permanent residents in the Anatolian cities; the movers traveled back and forth from Ashur with the caravans. In organizing this early trade diaspora, the Assyrian merchants anticipated the activities of a host of later long-distance merchants in various parts of the world: Phoenicians, Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, Africans, Indians, Chinese, Native Americans, Italians, and Portuguese.

Trade diasporas are important in world history because the merchants who participated in them were both commodity-brokers and culture-brokers; the traders facilitated the exchange of things and also served as transmitters of ideas. Xinru Liu's (1988) book on trade between India and China illustrates very clearly how economic transactions and cultural interchange often overlapped. Buddhists in India sought silk banners from China for the decoration of stupas and for ceremonial use. Chinese Buddhists looked to India as the source of the "seven jewels" (precious stones) used in worship. Monasteries in India and China were often located on key trade routes and benefitted from the patronage of merchants. Sometimes the monks engaged in trade and banking themselves.

I like to use traveller's accounts as a way of demonstrating the connections between commerce and cultural contacts. My students read excerpts from Herodotus (Stearns et al., 1988: 21-24) on Egypt both for his observations about Egyptian life and for indirect evidence of trade between the Aegean and the Nile regions during the classical period. Assignments from the travel book by Xuan Zang (Stearns et al., 1988: 145-49), the Chinese Buddhist monk who journeyed from the Tang capital to India from 629 to 645, and from Marco Polo (Stearns et al., 1988: 135-39) are intended to illustrate other links between cross-cultural travel and trade. A lecture based on Ross Dunn's (1986) expert retelling of Ibn Battuta's amazing journeys in the Afro-Eurasian world during the 14th century is my attempt to help students see the overlap between cultural interchange and economic transactions within the Realm of Islam.

World-system theory, my third framework for teaching about the importance of long-distance trade, constitutes one of the major growth industries in historical studies today. The contributions of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1988), Andre Gunder Frank (1978), and numerous other members of the world-system school to a new understanding of the economic relationship between Europe and the wider world since the 15th century are well known. Two decades after the publication of Wallerstein's first volume, it is not easy to imagine how a history of the modern world could be written without taking account of the catagories of core and

periphery.

One of the most interesting developments in world-system scholarship during the past decade is the application of world-system analysis to the the premodern world. Jane Schneider (1977; reprinted in Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991) opened this field of inquiry in her influential article "Was There a Precapitalist World System?." Schneider's central point is that prior to the 15th century the trade in luxuries or "prestige goods" sometimes created asymmetrical links between world regions which prefigured those analyzed by Wallerstein. For example, Schneider maintains that when Chinese silk was exchanged for European bullion, a precapitalist core-periphery relationship had come into being.

Andre Gunder Frank (1990, 1991, 1993) and a growing number of scholars from various disciplines (Chase-Dunn and Hall, 1991) have recently begun to project the world system framework far back in time. Barry Gills and Frank (1990) argue that the modern world system originated in the Bronze Age around 2500 BCE when trade relations first linked Mesopotamia, the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt, the Indus Valley, and parts of central Asia into one interconnected sphere of what they term "accumulation." According to Gills and Frank, this earliest world system contained the essential features of its modern counterpart: asymmetrical relationships between regions in the core and periphery, continuing struggles for hegemony within the core, and

alternating periods of expansion ("A phases") and contraction ("B phases") in the system as a whole. Gills and Frank argue that during the past 4500 years this original world system has expanded to embrace all of humankind.

The most fully-developed application of the world-system perspective to a specific period in the premodern world, and the one that is most important to my course, is Janet Abu-Lughod's (1988) justly-praised book, Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350. Abu-Lughod argues that the century from 1250 to 1350 was a crucial watershed in world history in that a vast trade circuit stretching from France to China drew together key parts of Afro-Eurasia as never before. For Abu-Lughod the 13th century world system differed from its modern capitalist counterpart in that it had three cores rather than one. From 1250 to 1350 Europe, the Middle East, and Asia were roughly equal members of a great Old World network of exchange.

This premodern world system was to some extent an "archipeligo of towns" in which urban centers in Europe (Bruges, Ghent, Genoa and Venice), the Middle East (Cairo, Aden, and Hormuz), and Asia (Samarkand, Calicut, Kanchipuram, Malacca, Quanzhou, and Hangzhou) were connected to one another by trade and shared in a common culture of commerce. In some of these cities manufacturing, especially the production of textiles, flourished along with trade: Ghent was a major center of woolen cloth production, Cairo produced refined sugar and cotton textiles, and Kanchipuram in south

India was known for its production of cotton cloth.

After flourishing for about a century, the 13th century world system collapsed. Abu-Lughod's explanation for this development is one of the most interesting parts of her book. She argues that the population declines stemming from the spread of the Bubonic Plague in the 14th century led to a fall-off of long-distance trade. The simultaneous unraveling of the Pax Mongolica made exchange across the central Asian overland routes increasingly uncertain. Not long after this, the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) banned Chinese ships from participation in the Indian Ocean commerce. The withdrawl of Chinese vessels from the Nanhai trade was the final blow. The great trade net which had emerged around 1250 and, for a century, connected key regions of Afro-Eurasia in a non-hegemonic (or multi-hegemonic) world system was broken. In Abu-Lughod's striking formulation, the "fall of the East" had cleared the way for the "rise of the West."

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Abu-Lughod's book is excellent for drawing together the themes of exchange, trade diasporas, and world systems as I conclude my course. But the extent to which an emphasis on cross-cultural trade is successful in helping students move from world history as facts and factoids to world history as patterns and processes remains in doubt. The evidence from student papers and examinations in this regard is mixed. Soon I shall be reading my most recent student evaluations. Stay tuned.

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